

Mai-Thu Perret & Sophie Taeuber-Arp, «*Ich bin wü ü ü ü ü ü ü ü tend*»

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Although depicted on the old 50-franc note, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, like so many women in the Dada circle, was long denied recognition. In recent years, much has been done to honor her oeuvre, including the retrospective «*Gelebte Abstraktion*» [Lived Abstraction], which traveled from Basel (Kunstmuseum) to London (Tate Modern) and New York (MoMa) in 2021.

Nevertheless, the artist's complex oeuvre, shifting between applied, visual, and performing arts, needs to be further explored. Many art-historical and cultural-analytical questions arise that are still topical today: for example, abstraction processes or concepts of artishood in the context of genre hierarchies, gender attribution, or democracy. Particularly revealing in this regard are Taeuber-Arp's letters, acquired by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich [Zürich Central Library], which were recently examined in an edition project by Medea Hoch, Walburga Krupp, and Sigrid Schade. Until now, the art-historical reception of Sophie Taeuber-Arp has been based on the memories of Hans Arp and his companions. With the letters, the artist's «own» view and her system of reference can be reconstructed for the first time. With the letters, for the first time insights into the intimate reference system of the artist can be given.

In the context of this exhibition, the exploration of Sophie Taeuber-Arp takes place in dialogue with the Geneva-based artist Mai-Thu Perret (*1976). In her multidisciplinary work, Perret combines feminist concerns, literary references, and questions about craft with the avant-garde movements of the 20th century. At the forefront of her work are both political and formal questions about materiality and work methods. Dada, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp in particular, represent important sources of inspiration for Perret. For the exhibition, she has produced two new works, a neon work, *Untitled (Different Ways)*, 2022, and a paravent, *Untitled (for S.T.)*, 2022, which respond to Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre. Two earlier works that also reference the Dada pioneer, the 2018 wool rug *Untitled (Green Oval)* and a small-format painting (2009), as well as the loan of Elsi Giauque's *Demoiselle* (1981), complete the show.

The works of Mai-Thu Perret are juxtaposed with selected letters written by Sophie Taeuber-Arp and documents of the Dadaist's work and life. For conservational reasons, after three months the originals will be replaced by other exhibits. Among them are works by some of Taeuber-Arp's students, such as Gertrud Sonderegger and Elsie Giauque of the textile design class at the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich [Zurich School of Applied Arts]. Due to the fragile condition of the paper, the actual letters cannot be exhibited. However, the heirs of the letter collections and the Zentralbibliothek have ensured that the letters will remain accessible as scans. The above-mentioned letter edition by Hoch, Krupp, and Schade brings together almost 500 letters and postcards that were sent to Hans Arp or to Taeuber-Arp's sister, Erika Schlegel-Taeuber. Curator Salome Hohl has selected twelve letters, arranged them into broad themes, and, together with Mai-Thu Perret, placed them on Perret's six-part painting. These letters, transcribed and translated in full, can be perused in the reader on the shelf near the entrance, each with extended comments from the edition compiled by Medea Hoch. Thanks to the two postcards from Sophie Taeuber-Arp to Otto Morach, owned by Hugo Stüdeli, in the room's display case, Taeuber-Arp's handwriting can be viewed in the original. These cards are on public view for the first time, as is the necklace made by Sophie Taeuber-Arp, on loan from Johanna Lohse, daughter of the architect Ida Dürner and the Zurich concrete artist Richard Paul Lohse. This also provides an insight into Taeuber-Arp's broad network, which, in addition to Dada, also included the artist movements Das Neue Leben, Cercle et Carré, Abstraction-Création, and Allianz (Lohse) as well as the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich (Morach) or the Deibschitzschule [Deibschitz School] in Munich.

Both Cabaret Voltaire and the Galerie Dada in Zurich's Sprünglihaus must be recognized as important landmarks in Taeuber-Arp's trajectory. In the Dada House, a discussion between women* from different generations and regions emerges. Taeuber-Arp's years in the Dada circle stand at the interface between her apprenticeship years in eastern Switzerland and her path into the avant-garde, which later took her to Paris, among other places, as a pioneer of abstract art. The exhibition title «Ich bin wü ü ü ü ü tend» [I am a letter] is from a letter Taeuber-Arp wrote to Hans Arp from Arosa on May 4, 1919 (paravent 1 recto), in which she expressed her disgust at what she saw as some gimmicky (male) Dadaists portraying themselves as «radical artists.» The letter provides an additional perspective on both Taeuber-Arp and Dada, but in the framework of the exhibition, the phrase «Ich bin wü ü ü ü ü tend» is also representative of the rejection of hierarchies and constricting artistic methods.

Xeroxed copies on Sophie Taeuber-Arp on a six-part painting by Mai-Thu Perret: the paravent as a plane to think through art history and as a «cut-up» of narratives and compositions. New insights into a repurposed paravent by Taeuber-Arp.

On the right side of the room is Mai-Thu Perret's work *Untitled (for S.T.)*, 2022. Xeroxed copies of letter clippings, transcripts, photographs, and other documents relating to Taeuber-Arp's life and work interact with Perret's abstract paintings. The decision to print Taeuber-Arp's material on lilac paper in DIN-A4 and DIN-A5 follows the exhibition concept: the copies simultaneously create a distance from and a proximity to Sophie Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre in the context of her present and our own. In their superimposition with Perret's visual language and the DIN standards applicable to our time, the statements and images seem partly outdated but also simultaneously very current. Taeuber-Arp appears as an extremely emancipated, educated, and courageous woman who was dedicated to art and was not afraid to express her own opinions. In contrast to the descriptions of her contemporaries, who describe her as shy and quiet, the image that emerges from her letters is of someone determined and quite outspoken: «Ich bin wü ü ü ü ü tend» (letter 46, paravent 1 recto). Although in large part she can be seen as a role model for today's feminists, as, for example, when she complains about the shabby wages, in some passages she also makes derogatory comments about obese Jewish women, for instance, or people in the streets fighting against classism. At the same time, it should be noted that Sophie Taeuber-Arp had Jewish friends, supported them during the war, and took a firm stand against Hitler early on (paravent 3 verso). She nevertheless seemed to believe in the political power of art if her signature on the Dadaist manifesto is taken seriously (paravent 1 recto). In turn, her feminist role and her pioneering position within the applied and handicraft arts can also be explained, thanks to the letters, by her privileged and reformist background in eastern Switzerland as well as her family ties (paravent 3 recto). She was supported by her banker uncle amid the flourishing textile industry and creatively encouraged by her mother. Sophie Taeuber-Arp's best-known ancestor is Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), who shaped the Reformation after Huldrych Zwingli's death in 1531 as antistes of the church in Zurich. In spite of this provenance, it was Sophie Taeuber-Arp who kept Hans Arp and herself afloat with the help of her job at the Kunstgewerbeschule.

Finally, the display also raises the question of how an institution with the resources, size, and mandate of Cabaret Voltaire should deal with this extensive and now highly endowed oeuvre. Cabaret Voltaire aims to treat the heritage in a lively way and to raise new perspectives, and Mai-Thu Perret's literary approach to the exhibition display is beneficial to this. Among other things, Perret draws inspiration from the «cut-up» technique of the American writer William S. Burroughs, who created random and associative new narratives by cutting up and reassembling texts. Perret is also interested in Dada in terms of this structure: noises, sounds and images are interrupted and combined to create a new momentum. For Perret, this is a strategy to cope with the present.

Probably, the assembling of forms and the play with materials also means for Taeuber-Arp the attempt to create new structures between order and outbreak. With regard to the «cut-ups» of materials, the most recent research reveals new insights into an iconic work by Taeuber-Arp. As Medea Hoch points out in the contribution compiled in the reader for this exhibition, it can be assumed that Taeuber-Arp's triptych from 1918, posthumously titled *Triptyque. Composition verticale-horizontale à triangles réciproques* and now in the Kunsthaus Zürich, was originally a paravent. According to Hoch, the reference is found in the addition to the title: *Triptyque (paravent)*. This finding is confirmed by the most recent investigation of art technology by the conservator Franziska Beeli. Her analyses have shown that the canvases were stretched on frames and subsequently glued to fiber composite panels, and during this process were presumably shortened at the lower edge. But the paravent also says a lot about how art history operates: namely, both one's own decisions and those of others affect what is to be chosen as the key work. In the case of the paravent, a living object was chosen as a masterpiece by Hans Arp through skillful placement, first

at «Documenta 1» in 1955 and later as a donation to the Kunsthaus Zürich. Probably the conversion from paravent to triptych took place on Taeuber-Arp's participation in the 1939 exhibition «Réalités

Nouvelles» at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris, as documented in a photograph by Frédo Sidès (paravent 3 verso). Mai-Thu Perret is also interested in the relationship between utilitarian objects and autonomous art, functionality, symbolism, and aesthetics. The paravent is an expression of this, in which she focuses on women such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp or Anni Albers (for example, in a recent Kunst am Bau project for a swimming pool in Geneva titled L'Eau-Vive), who all too often remained mere footnotes of Bauhaus or Dada.

Handicraft and abstraction in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's and Mai-Thu Perret's work: «Ich bin wü ü ü ü üü üü tend» as a search for freedom of expression and the question of how art relates to the world. Mai-Thu Perret's dialogue with Sophie Taeuber-Arp arises not only from the numerous references to the Dada pioneer that she gathers in her work, but also because she practices and reflects on abstract art. In modernism, art with an emphasis on geometric abstraction was elevated to a universally readable language. To this day, the social meaning of the expression by rectangles, lines or circles as universal symbols is discussed. While some believe that geometric abstraction frees us from ideological categorizations and illusions, others mistrust universalisms, seeing an inherent western or male dominance, and an appropriation of non-European art therein, and complain that such abstraction obscures reality.

Mai-Thu Perret is aware of this history of abstraction. It is the history of a multi-layered approach to art, which on the one hand oscillates between mysticism as well as the irrational and the search for geometric forms, and on the other hand can be understood as a reaction to social reforms and political movements – as, for example, when the anti-fascist Richard Paul Lohse arranges all surfaces and colors equally, ergo democratically. For Perret, abstraction is also linked to the search for freedom. She does not work according to a strict grid and is inspired by references to form and color from art history. A primary artistic focus is the question as to what extent the human mind automatically tries to break down abstract forms into symbols. Possibly this also involves a glimmer of hope that this aesthetic play with the imagination will save us from short-sighted thinking. Mai-Thu Perret does not approach this naively, however. It is precisely through the inclusion of historical positions that the limitations of this utopia always become noticeable, as, for example, when arts and crafts are denied the definition of radical abstraction because the work is coded as female.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's abstraction, compared to her male colleagues, stands not at the end of the artistic process, but at the beginning. Thus, her work is sometimes based on the principle of orthogonal textile art, which led her to vertical-horizontal grids as early as 1915. The art-historical reception of the time was one of classification and hierarchization of genres, meaning that her applied art works were largely ignored. It was not until 1929, in Paris, that she first showed autonomous works in art exhibitions. For 15 years before that, she exhibited handicraft works, such as in February 1916 in the textile exhibition at the Zurich Kunstgewerbemuseum. Taeuber-Arp showed pillows in cross stitch, blankets, and white and crank embroidery, as well as a bag in bead embroidery. In the same year, Franziska Anner (see the book on the shelf next to the entrance) wrote a volume about women and Swiss arts and crafts, in which she reproduced Taeuber-Arp's contribution to the exhibition. Among other things, she described the influence of Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism on the applied arts. With regard to Taeuber-Arp, she recorded that the geometric stylization of the motifs and the attention to the square and rectangle in the conception of the pattern put her work in dialogue with Cubism. On the one hand, this description is progressive; on the other, it ignores the fact that the applied arts were important sources for fine art. Taeuber-Arp was more radical than many avant-garde artists precisely because of her entry via applied arts.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp plays with geometric forms that seek harmonic compositions but always accommodate elements that step out of line. She was fascinated by Wilhelm Worringer (paravent 2 recto), who proclaimed that «the work of art stands as an independent organism on an equal footing with nature and, in its deepest inner essence, without any connection to it.» She also draws on Carl Gustav Jung, who saw the task of art as bringing the collective unconscious to light. Laban, in whose company Taeuber-Arp danced on Monte Verità and in Zurich, understood human movements as a geometric system.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp designed everything with the same dedication: carpets, lamps, cans, puppets, kitchen furnishings, desks, paintings, sculptures, interiors or houses. This is something she expressed in a teaching manual on the textile profession that she published in 1927 together with Blanche Gauchat for the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich (see display case and paravan 2 verso). In the preface she writes: «The desire to enrich and beautify things cannot be interpreted materialistically,

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that is, in the sense of increasing the value of possessions, but rather it springs from the drive for perfection and creativity.» Mai-Thu Perret found this source material in 2019 at the first preliminary meeting for the exhibition at the Dada Library at Cabaret Voltaire and decided to translate an exercise sheet into a neon work. In doing so, she transposes a formal language with traditionally feminine connotations, as well as patterns from the textile trades, into a medium that follows the male-

dominated Minimal Art tradition. As an art form that was revolutionized by the feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s, Perret is interested in Fiber Art. Indeed, many of the best-known Fiber Art artists were and are women, for example Elsie Giauque and Gertrud Sonderegger, students of Taeuber-Arp, whose works Perret dedicates space to in the exhibition. Giauque, who after Taeuber-Arp herself taught at the Kunstgewerbeschule and who today is considered a pioneer of textile art, was strongly influenced by Taeuber-Arp, especially with regard to the concept of textile as spatial art. Her textile structures have distinguished themselves by their audacity on several occasions at the biennials of tapestry in Lausanne. The piece *Demoiselle*, integrated in the exhibition by Perret's initiative, is part of a series realized between 1982 and 1987 in which the sculptural experimentation with mixed materials such as nylon, silk and plastic strips evokes a weightless body whose feet are floating away from an uncertain ground. However, the transparency of the figure is contrasted by the colored hands that surround the body and give it movement. The centrality of hands is a leitmotif in the artist's oeuvre, which contribution to the textile art has blurred the boundaries between craft and art in a remarkable way.